THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Peace

John M. Buchanan

March 12, 2000

"Lent is a time to begin again. ...a time to pause and take stock: am I becoming the kind of person I want to become? Do I stand for something I can be proud of? Lent is a good time to stand up and be counted.... Lent is, finally, a time for hope. Life doesn't have to be a time of discouragement, when we give up trying to make something of ourselves. The Christian life is, in part, a decision to keep looking at the One who went through all we have to go through, who was buffeted even more than we are, who died and rose again."

John B. Coburn
Retired Episcopal Bishop

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

PEACE

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Romans 5: 1-5
Mark 4: 35-41

"He woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!'" (Mark 4:39)

O God, sometimes life feels like a little boat in a big storm. We come here to experience a bit of quiet, a sense that even though we may feel that life is out of control, you are still sovereign. Startle us with your truth, open our hearts to your word and grant us your peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The Perfect Storm was a runaway best seller two years ago, a hair-raising account, by Sebastian Junger, of the New England fishing fleets' encounter with the storm of the century. In October, 1991, a rare combination of atmospheric factors converged to create what meteorologists called "the perfect storm," with hurricane force winds and waves over 100 feet high. It came without warning and the story of what happened—the boats that made it and those that didn't, the heroic rescues by the Coast Guard, the detailed accounts of what it's like to be on a small boat in the middle of a storm, kept me turning pages until the end. It is not a book you want to read before leaving on a cruise. I was not planning to take a cruise but I have a very modest number of experiences sailing—enough to understand something of what happens on a boat in a storm. But reading the book I experienced a deeper discomfort which I still experience when I think about it. It is, in the words of one reviewer, "a breathless sense of what it feels like to be caught, helpless, in the grip of a force of nature beyond our understanding or control."

I don't know about you, but I don't much like the sense of being caught in the force of anything I can't understand or control. I don't know about you, or yes, better said, I think I do know about you, and you—and I—rather enjoy the sense that we are in control, at least of our own lives, that we're making the decisions, and running the show.

It is an illusion, of course, albeit a pleasant and harmless one. The simple fact is that we are not in control of very much. We are not threatened by the immediacy of nature's power—as were the fishermen in the middle of the perfect storm, but even our erratic Chicago weather—from snow to 75 degrees to tornado and back again, all within a week, is a gentle reminder that we are not in control. Living in a city, of course, provides lots of reminders. People who visit New York or Chicago often remark that it feels like things are out of control—the traffic, grid lock, cabs careening, horns blowing, people occasionally shouting at each other—it does feel like primal chaos occasionally. Humorist Dave Barry has fun comparing the serenity of suburbia with the frenzy of city life. Suburbanites, he says, worry about things like the price of cauliflower. Urbanites worry about whether they will survive the subway ride.

The truth is that it is an illusion and that we are not in control of much.

A young couple I know moved to Atlanta to join Coca Cola, and after buying a new home, finding schools for their children, and finishing unpacking, are told that their jobs have been eliminated.

A successful young lawyer, on her way up, single but deeply in love, discovers that she's pregnant and suddenly her carefully structured career path is not as neat as she wants it to be.

At the end of a routine physical, the doctor says—I'm admitting you to the hospital. You need by-pass surgery tomorrow.

Harvard Medical School's Herbert Benson writes:

> "Most of us find that we are helpless in solving the big problems. But our concern usually involves everyday difficulties. Our frustrations come about because we generally can't even solve the less earthshaking problems, such as being on time to work in a large, congested city. Indeed, the everyday demands of living make it more and more difficult to escape the increasingly adverse psychological effects that seem to be built into our existence. Whatever it may be—the daily commute, or the rising cost of living, or the noise and fumes of the city, or unemployment, or random violence—we find it difficult to reach a satisfactory equilibrium, and as a result we become victims of stress." (*The Relaxation Response,* p.16-17)

Every now and then we are given a reminder that we are not in control. And when it happens the questions come:

--Where can I turn?
--Who can I trust?
--Who will anchor me in this storm?
--Who will be with me?

One time the friends of Jesus found themselves out of control and scared to death. It wasn't the perfect storm, but it was all they could handle. And of all things, he's asleep in the stern. The crossing at night was his idea in the first place. He had been teaching in his favorite spot, beside the Sea of Galilee. It's actually a lake surrounded by mountains. When the crowd grew so large that he couldn't walk away, he suggested that they cross to the other side as the sun was setting. There was a small sail, and oars. And after dark, as occasionally happens, the wind came up suddenly out of the west, and the surrounding mountains acted like a funnel and suddenly the quiet lake was roiling and heaving and the waves were high and the swells made it very difficult to control the little vessel. A boat in a storm is a busy place.

Fresh in the memory of 35 of us from Fourth Church is the day last summer we boarded the Campbeltown Ferry for the two hour voyage from Scotland across the Irish Sea to Ballycastle, Northern Ireland. There were gale force winds that day and in the shelter of

land a lively ride. When we hit open sea, however, the huge ferry boat began to heave and buck and plunge into the swells and rock back and forth. People were knocked out of their seats, walking about was very difficult, the dishes and glasses from the galley crashed onto the deck and when crew members turned white and then green, the thought did occur to me—I'm not in control here.

In any event, Peter, James, John and Andrew are struggling to keep that little boat pointed directly into the waves which means that they are getting soaked as each successive wave splashes over the prow. But if they slip sideways, parallel to the waves, they will be swamped immediately and go down. So they've hauled in most of the sail and they're struggling with the tiller and oars to keep the boat pointed ahead, and whoever is left is bailing with buckets, bowls, cups, bare hands, and Jesus is sleeping and someone—surely it is Peter—cries out—"Teacher, do you not care if we are perishing?" which is far too fastidious, and if it was Peter, it was "For God's sake Jesus, we're going down. Get up and help, or don't you care?"

Now it's almost irresistible at this point for modern men and women to ask, "Did he really do what the Bible says he did? Did it really happen that way?" . . . "He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!" and the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. " And in a sense what comes next is worse because he asks "Why are you afraid?" "Why are we afraid? Because we are about to die, that's why! Of course we were afraid" . . . "Have you no faith?" "Well, no, since you asked, or maybe yes, a little bit but we were going down and having faith didn't seem to matter much."

All we can know is that something happened that night that was pivotal for them and their faith; that they learned something about themselves and him that they had not known before. All we can know is that in the middle of a storm, his friends learned that they could trust him with their lives, that he was trustworthy, and that in spite of their fear, they could rely on his presence and his promise.

What we can know is that this story was remembered and told for decades and finally written down by Matthew, Mark and Luke and that it was a precious story to the early Christian community in the midst of fierce and unrelenting Roman persecution, their friends and loved ones hauled off and arrested and tortured and crucified and thrown to the lions, when the whole enterprise felt very much like a pathetic handful of helpless people on a tiny boat in the middle of a great storm.

What we can know is that this story was a source of comfort for them, the source of faith for them, the source of their trust that come what may, he would not abandon them and that their future, whether that future meant the arena, a cross, prison—was safe in his hands.

Well, where do you turn when the storm hits? Who can you trust? Who is your anchor? Who can you count on to be with you?

The four year old son of one of our members came out of Sunday School a few weeks ago and put the theological quandary with existential precision. "Mommy," he asked, "if God is in your heart, how can he be on the ground to help you?" Precisely—"Do you not care

that we are perishing?" an almost exact echo of the plaintiff cry of the children of Israel in the wilderness to Moses, "We're perishing—we're starving out here in the desert—don't you care?" Echoed by Reynolds Price in his answer to a dying young man, *Does God Exist and Does He Care?* Echoed in our dark night of the soul when we feel most alone, most helpless, and when the only prayer we can utter is, "Don't you care that I'm perishing?"

And what this story says is, in the history of religious thought, absolutely astounding. It affirms that God is not ensconced somewhere in the remote reaches of the universe, passively watching this drama unfold. This early Christian story makes the astonishing affirmation that God is right there in that boat.

When her husband was dying and life seemed absolutely out of control, Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights." (*A Two Part Invention,* p.124)

The promise is that Jesus Christ will not abandon us. Not that he will save us from the storms, but that he will stay with us. It is the promise and the ministry of his presence, his complete identification with us, his assumption of our humanity, his incarnation, his becoming one of us.

The ministry of presence is sometimes all we have to give to one another. In the midst of deep trouble, sometimes we can't fix it, or even make it a little better. All we can do is stand close, and hold on to one another and listen to one another.

The Today Show last Monday carried the story of the ten year old in Massachusetts with leukemia. In the course of his recent chemotherapy his hair fell out. And when he returned to his elementary school completely bald, dreadfully embarrassed, he encountered his principal and everyone of his classmates, all of whom had shaved their heads and looked just like him—a redemptive, graceful gesture of presence.

"Trouble," the late John Carmody wrote, "is everywhere." Carmody was a Professor of Religion at Santa Clara University, California. As he was dying of cancer he wrote several books. *Psalms for Times of Trouble* is one of them.

> "Trouble is everywhere. You can have completely healthy bones and still suffer severe pain, physical or emotional. You can face huge problems that threaten to plow you under. Though you avoid alcohol and drugs, you can lose your job, or suffer a heart attack. Though you do your job conscientiously and say your prayers every night, you can find yourself the victim of gossip or aching loneliness. Teenagers can be desperately unhappy, but so can old people. Women worry themselves sick, but so do men. Trouble spares no one." (p.5)

Carmody's *Psalms for Times of Trouble* is a reminder from one facing the final loss of control that there is one who does care, who stands with us, and into whose hands we can place our futures.

He wrote:

"O God, incline unto my aid
Lord, make haste to help me
In the dead of night
I hear the furies howl
Without your support, I fall down and down
But you, my God, can stop my falling . . ."(p.15)

Looking ahead to the unknown future, Professor Carmody wrote:

"I feel powerless, God,
to help myself
My trouble is more than I can manage
I resent its defining me
Will you not give me a new definition?
And reset all my margins?" (p.97)

God, Carmody testified, is sovereign in all ways. "Nevertheless, God is always 'our Lord,' a divinity we can imagine holding shares in our enterprises, caring what happens to us. Is any thought more consoling?" (p. 21)

In the middle of a storm Jesus was in the boat with them. And in that experience they learned that he would not abandon them and that even when life was utterly out of control, they could trust him.

It is a coping strategy for you and me, a source of blessed peace in the midst of out-of-control chaos, a source of encouragement in the midst of despair, a source of confidence when nothing else seems to be working. He's in it with you.

And it is a promise, an ultimate promise, in the middle of the storm, that you are safe—forever safe.

"Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, help me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light;
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead
me home."

Amen.